Empathy as the opposite of egocentrism – why the simulation theory and the direct perception theory of empathy fail

Blanchet, Robert

Abstract: This paper presents a new, third-personal account of empathy that characterizes empathy as being sensitive to others' concerns as opposed to remaining stuck in one's egocentric perspective on the world. The paper also demonstrates why this account is preferable to its two main rivals, namely the simulation theory of empathy, and the direct perception theory of empathy.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-018-09630-5

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in *Topoi: An International Review of Philosophy.* The final authenticated version is available online at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-018-09630-5

Empathy as the Opposite of Egocentrism: Why the Simulation Theory and the Direct Perception Theory of Empathy Fail

Robert Blanchet

Abstract

This paper presents a new, third-personal account of empathy that characterizes empathy as being sensitive to others' concerns as opposed to remaining stuck in one's egocentric perspective on the world. The paper also demonstrates why this account is preferable to its two main rivals, namely the simulation theory of empathy, and the direct perception theory of empathy.

Keywords

Empathy, Theory of Mind, Social Cognition, Moral Psychology, Zahavi, Gallagher, Goldman

Introduction

In the current debate about spectator engagement, film scholars and philosophers often describe empathy as a process of perspective taking. Based on the influential distinction between central and acentral imagining introduced by Richard Wollheim (1999) and the simulation theory (e.g. Goldman 2006; Stueber 2006; De Vignemont and Jacob 2012), this process is usually understood to involve either: a) the spectator imagining feeling the character's emotion in an experiential, first-person manner; or more prominently b) the spectator actually feeling and thus replicating the character's emotional state. The spectator's sympathetic and antipathetic emotions, in contrast, are usually said to require no perspective taking in the sense of a) and b) but only an external assessment of the character's well-being and a desire that the character should or should not fare well. Hence, while defenders of the observer account of narrative engagement, such as Noël Carroll (2011)[1], reject the notion of empathy in general because they hold that we never replicate the character's emotion, defenders of the participant view of narrative engagement, such as Berys Gaut (2010),[2] usually view empathy as an additional process that is independent from sympathy.

An alternative view, which has gained some prominence in recent years, is the direct perception theory of empathy (e.g. Zahavi and Overgaard 2011; Zahavi 2014; 2017; Gallagher 2017; Jardine and Szanto 2017), or what, due to its roots in the writings of Edmund

[1] Also Plantinga (2009).

[2] Other defenders of the participant view include: Smith (1995); Grodal (1997); Vaage (2010); Coplan (2004); and Eder (2008).

Husserl (2016), Edith Stein (2008), and Max Scheler (2008), one might also call the phenomenologist account of empathy. According to this view, empathy involves no isomorphic feeling states or simulation, but rather is constituted by the supposed fact that we can directly perceive other people's intentions, emotions, and possibly other mental states in their expressive behavior.[3]

Not all advocates of the phenomenological tradition share this view. Although he agrees with the direct perception theory as such, Shaun Gallagher (2001; 2007; 2012a; 2012b; 2015), for example, prefers not to equate this theory with empathy, and instead adopts a somewhat agnostic position according to which empathy can be tentatively characterized as:

> (1) a primary, nonreducible, other-directed feeling of concern or interest that (2) is characterized by a clear distinction between empathizer and the other person, that (3) targets the other's situated experience and (4) consciously ascribes that experience specifically to that other (Gallagher 2012a).[4]

In addition, phenomenologists stress the interactive nature of our social encounters and criticize simulationist accounts of mindreading for being too mentalistic (Gallagher and Hutto 2008; Hutto 2008). Simply put, this is the claim that for most of our everyday encounters with other people, we are not trying to figure out what is going on inside their head because there are plenty of other means by which to understand their behavior. This includes the direct perception of their intentions and emotions in their expressive gestures, verbal communication, as well as the claim that in many encounters we simply follow social conventions to coordinate our actions.

The latter criticism is also targeted at the theory-theory of mindreading which holds that we read the minds of other people by making inferences that are based on a body of theoretical knowledge, such as the folk psychological principle that people tend to take actions that contribute to reaching their goals, or the principle that one feels happy when one has reached one's goal (e.g. Fodor 1987; Gopnik and Meltzoff 1997; Spaulding 2010; 2018).

However, since they are aware of the objection that bodily postures and the expressivity of the face can only take us so far, and that it seems far-fetched to claim, for example, that I can perceive my friend's long-term goal to become a doctor in his expressive behavior, phenomenologists do not reject the idea that we use folk psychological knowledge for mindreading throughout. Rather than referring to such knowledge as "a theory", or "the theory of mind", however, they prefer to characterize such knowledge as "narrative competency", "a rich store of narratives", or the "massive hermeneutical background" that informs our understanding of others (Gallagher 2012a: 369, 372, 371).

Part of the motivation behind this terminological distancing is the substantial claim that our folk psychological competency is acquired through exposure to narratives, such as

---

[3] For the debate about the direct perception theory as such see, e.g., Jacob (2011); Lavelle (2012); Gallagher (2012b; 2015); Newen, Welpinghus and Juckel (2015); Spaulding (2015; 2017). For a discussion of phenomenological theories of empathy with regard to film see, e.g., Vaage (2006); Schmetkamp (2017a; 2017b); D'Aloia (2012).

[4] There seem to be two reasons why Gallagher refrains from tying empathy to the direct perception theory: 1) Gallagher leans toward a conception of empathy as something that is more than standard mindreading, whereas the direct perception theory is a theory about standard mindreading; 2) Gallagher wants to avoid limiting empathy to the face-to-face encounter. I will return to the latter problem of the direct perception theory below. For a more recent characterization of empathy by Gallagher with regard to acting see, (Gallagher and Gallagher 2019).

children's stories (read by a caregiver), or verbal reports of personal experiences, rather than an innate theory, as some advocates of the theory-theory have suggested (e.g. Baron-Cohen 1995). In addition, Gallagher writes that we understand others by placing their actions in a "narrative framework" (2012a: 377), and that he prefers the term because "a narrative is about some particular person or group, in some particular situation", whereas the principles of the theory-theory "are relatively timeless and general statements or rules thought to apply to the majority of cases, and are applied only by inference to any particular case" (2012a: fn 2).

Since I see no reason why a theory-theorist should in principle reject the idea that the generalizations and knowledge we use for mindreading can be of a highly particular nature (e.g. "My husband hasn't much of a sweet tooth, so he is probably not going to like this cake"; "She is reluctant to let her kids play-fight because, as a five-year-old, one of her classmates accidentally died from such a fight"), it seems to me that the phenomenologists are arguing against a straw man in this regard.[5] Is it really that important whether we refer to the knowledge and assumptions I have about my friend or a stranger as having *a theory* about her, or as knowing her *story*, or as possessing a *person image* of her, as Albert Newen (2015) put it in a recent paper? As long as what is meant by this is clear enough, I think not.

When they are substantial, though, details do matter, of course. So, to get to the point of this paper, I am not convinced by the simulation theory of empathy, nor the direct perception theory of empathy, nor Gallagher's tentative proposal. As such, here I will try to sketch an alternative view of empathy and show how it marks an improvement on its rivals.

For lack of a better term, I will call my proposal the third-person account of empathy. As this label suggests, it is mostly in line with the theory-theory view of mindreading, and the person model theory (Newen 2015), although it adds at least one element that, in my view, the other proposals either lack or fail to properly appreciate. For reasons of space I will focus on empathy on the level of emotion, or what I prefer to call empathy on the level of the other's fortune (my theory about empathy on the level of action and motivation will be set aside for another occasion).

Like Max Scheler (2008: 19–23) and Alessandro Giovannelli (2008; 2009), I will argue against the widespread view that empathy and sympathy are two independent forms of other-directed feeling states. Instead, I propose that the arousal of our sympathetic and antipathetic emotions necessarily requires empathy alongside the sympathetic or antipathetic desire that the other should fare well or badly. However, unlike Giovannelli (and Scheler to some extent), I do not hold on to the premise that empathy per se must involve an at least subliminal congruent or corresponding feeling state to that of the target.[6] So, my proposal is not that empathy in this traditional sense is a requirement for sympathy, but that empathy with a person, or a fictional character, needs to be defined differently.

[5] In Fodor's version of the theory-theory, for example, the knowledge and principles that we use to read other minds clearly includes our knowledge about "people whose psychology [we] know intimately: [our] closest friends, say, or the spouse of [our] bosom" (1987: 3). Fodor also stresses that what is relevant to his approach to mindreading is not the content of such exemplary truisms as "the burnt child fears the fire" but the "'deductive structure' that is so characteristic of explanation in real science" (1987: 6–7).

[6] To be correct, Scheler (2008: 20) limits this congruent feeling element to "feelingly grasping the quality of the foreign feeling" (my translation). I don't think too much hinges on this refinement, however, because Scheler's account of empathy differs from my account irrespective of this element.

The Third-Person Theory of Empathy

In a nutshell, this alternative definition holds that it is sufficient for empathy when I am thinking about how a state of affairs affects the concerns of another, as opposed to appraising this state of affairs from the perspective of how it affects my own concerns (or not paying attention to the state of affairs at all).[7] While the former process, as such, is only a change of my mental focus and has no replicatory or mirroring effect, the latter process will often trigger in me one of my ordinary self-oriented emotions (e.g. feeling happy about the fact that I passed an exam, because this realizes my goal of passing the exam; or feeling outraged about the fact that my friend cheated on his wife because this violates my view that one ought to be faithful[8]). I refer to the former non-replicatory process as "looking at the world from an allocentric perspective," and to the latter as "looking at," or "remaining stuck in one's egocentric perspective on the world."

Note that when I am speaking of looking at something from the perspective of another person's concerns, I consider this to be only a figure of speech. Because unlike a defender of the simulation theory, I do not believe that this process requires me to imagine or pretend to be in the other's situation or to have his concerns, and, as a result, come to feel the same emotion as he does. Literally, it only means that I focus my attention on the other's concerns, rather than ignoring them or being preoccupied with my own concerns. It is a widening of my perspective to include, figure out, and focus on the other's point of view. But in order to do so, I suggest, I do not have to pretend or imagine that I occupy or possess that point of view.[9]

Instead of speaking of my or the other's concerns, as is customary in the psychological literature on the emotions, we can also speak of our individual preferences, such as my goals, the normative principles to which I subscribe, or my preferences in taste (Ortony, Clore and Collins 1988; Frijda 1986; Lazarus 1991; Tan 1996).

Thus, if I am planning a dinner party, and think something like: "let's make hamburgers, mmhh hamburgers are so yummy," and, as a result, I feel anticipatory joy and perhaps a slight dose of the yummy feeling, then I am not empathizing with anyone. But, if I then hesitate and think something like: "Oh wait, Karen is coming, and she is a vegetarian. Vegetarians don't eat meat, so she won't have anything proper to eat and will feel upset and hungry (assuming that not having anything to eat and having those feelings is not what Karen prefers)," then I am empathizing with Karen, according to my theory. This is opposed to the claim of the simulation theory of mindreading, according to which what is really going on in

---

[7] I will elaborate on the appraisal theory of emotions in the last section of the paper.

[8] In line with Ortony, Clore and Collins (1988), I reject the view that my outrage in such a case is a simulated response because for ordinary first-personal outrage, it is irrelevant whether the victim of an action that violates one of my normative principles is me or someone else. Likewise, I claim that it is irrelevant for ordinary first-personal disgust whether it is my action that violates one of my preferences in taste or someone else's action. Hence it is a mistake to believe that my disgust at seeing another person eat a worm relies on putting myself in the other's shoes. Moreover, I believe that there are good arguments for the view that other supposedly simulatory responses – such as vicarious embarrassment or even so-called empathy for pain – are actually sympathetic responses. For empirical evidence that supports the latter claim and questions large parts of previous neuroscientific studies on empathy for pain and empathy in general, see, e.g.: Iannetti et al (2013); Hu and Iannetti (2016); Krishnan et al (2016). For a response to this criticism by leading empathy researchers, see, e.g.: Zaki et al (2016) or De Vignemont and Jacob (2016). These are crucial elements for the defense of my theory, which, for reasons of space, I cannot elaborate here.

[9] One might object that I shouldn't speak of an allocentric perspective if I do not mean by that the adoption of another person's point of view. But I have deliberately chosen to stick with this metaphor because I want to stay as close as possible to our ordinary speech. My hope is that in this way readers will find it easier to consult their own intuitions about what we really mean by this expression in the relevant contexts.

such an ordinary piece of third-personal reasoning about another person is that I am pretending to be Karen, or a vegetarian, at the dinner party and become upset and hungry myself.[10]

Likewise, if in the fictional world of *Stepmom* (1998, Chris Columbus), Susan Sarandon's character focuses her attention on what it means for her children and their concerns and preferences that she has untreatable cancer, instead of looking at this cold, objective fact or state of affairs from the point of view of what it means for her own concerns, then she is empathizing with the children. And if she didn't do this, I claim, she would not feel sorry for her children even though she loves them very much and wishes them well. Because then Susan Sarandon's character would only feel self-directedly "upset" about the fact that *she* is losing her life, instead of feeling sorry for her children because *they* are losing their mother.[11]

If, analogously, the spectator were only to appraise the fictional fact that the mother will die from the point of view of his very own concerns, then the spectator would feel nothing or very little, because in respect of his own concerns the fact that the mother will die means nothing or very little. So, according to my theory, when the spectator learns about the fact that the mother has a terminal disease, the spectator will quickly appraise this fact as being irrelevant to any of his own concerns, from the point of view of his egocentric perspective, will feel nothing, and then will continue to watch the movie from the allocentric perspective of the characters.

That is, the spectator will focus his attention on what this (for him meaningless) fact means for the characters and their concerns – that is, how the fact that the mother will die relates to what *they* want in life, what *they* think is right or wrong, what *they* like, and so on (as in the third-personal reasoning about my friend and the dinner party). If, as with the mother, the spectator focuses on the children and makes inferences about what this means for the children's concerns, then he is empathizing with the children. And if the spectator directs his mental focus toward what this state of affairs means for the mother, then he is empathizing with the mother.

Hence, what makes the act of the mother, and that of the spectator, count as empathy, according to my account, is not the criterion that they are thinking about the children's feelings and try to imagine those feelings. This can be the case, and it is important, but it need not be the case. Nor is it the criterion of whether they are replicating the current, future, or hypothetical feelings of the children. Rather, there is another criterion that I take to be more plausible and robust, namely the criterion of whether I am following my egoistic and self-centered impulses and only look at the world from the point of view of what matters to *me*, or whether I am following my altruistic and allocentric impulses and think about what matters to *others*.

Accordingly, empathizing, as I describe it, isn't something that we sometimes do when we are at the cinema, and when we allegedly replicate the emotion of a character

---

[10] I will frequently switch between real world examples, "intrafictional" examples, and examples involving the film spectator because I believe that the patterns of empathizing and sympathizing are more or less analogical in all these cases. Of course, this is not to say that on a macro level there are great differences between our engagement with reality and film, because unlike in unmediated reality our empathy and sympathy are strongly influenced by the cinematic narration when we are watching a film. In addition, films can give us quick access to the biographies, traits and preferences of people who would be total strangers to us in the real world.

[11] The former is visibly the case in the scene where the mother comes to accept that she will not overcome her cancer.

consciously by pretending to be them – perhaps during a very intense scene. Nor is it the unconscious mirroring of the character's feeling states – through mimicry or neuronal resonance processes – but rather the "standard mode" in which we watch narrative movies.

Because, as with the mother, who after her first egocentric shock – "Oh my God, I am going to die," – allocentrically thinks "Oh my God, how terrible for the children," we are constantly looking at the states of affairs of the fictional world from the (for us) allocentric perspective of the characters. That is to say, we move our own concerns into the background and focus our attention on how the fictional states of affairs affect the characters' concerns.[12]

Again, this does not mean that we are not thinking about the character's feelings and that we may not also try to imagine those feelings or other aspects of their situation. Because by focusing our attention on someone else's concerns, rather than on our own, and by – metaphorically speaking – looking at a state of affairs from another person's point of view, we can make inferences about what the other person is feeling (e.g. that the boy will miss his mother because he wants her care and company). But this is neither necessary nor the essential aspect of the empathic act, in my view, because this act simply consists in stepping out of one's egocentric point of view on the world and focusing one's attention on the concerns of another.

Consider the scene from *The Sopranos* (1999–2007, David Chase et al) in which Carmella is talking to her comatose husband Tony in the hospital and is visibly feeling sorry and worrying for him because Tony was shot by his uncle and is hovering between life and death (S.06.E.02). Should we say that Carmella imagines how Tony feels about this state of affairs at this moment, or how Tony will feel when he is dead? Or is she replicating his feelings by pretending that she has been shot or by unconsciously mirroring Tony's facial expression, as the simulation theory of empathy would have it? I don't think so. Because Tony doesn't feel anything at this moment (or at least he does not have any negative feelings) and once he is dead, he probably won't be feeling anything either.

Nor does it seem plausible to say that Carmella perceives Tony's emotions or his intentions, in line with the direct perception theory of empathy, because his face and body are about as expressionless as can be.

And yet, Carmella is empathizing with Tony – in my sense of the term – because she is not looking at the fact that Tony Soprano is seriously wounded from the perspective of *her* concern to have her husband's company, or *her* concern to be financially supported, but from the perspective of *his* concern or preference to stay alive. Or at least she is not *only* looking at this state of affairs from the perspective of her own concerns because if she did, she would only feel self-directedly upset and afraid for *herself* rather than sympathetically feeling sorry *for Tony* and worrying *for him* because she wishes him well.

The same holds for the spectator: If I, as the spectator, were to "look" at the fictional state of affairs of Tony being shot only from the egocentric perspective of my own concerns, I would at best feel a slight dose of self-directed worry that I could lose my fictional friend Tony (Blanchet and Vaage 2012). However, it is most likely that I will be looking at this state of affairs from the perspective of Tony's concerns, or preferences, and thinking about what this means to *him*. As I will argue in more detail in the final section of this paper, the result of

[12] Arguably one of the reasons why we do this so readily in the cinema is because, unlike in reality, the fictional states of affairs cannot affect our goals, or at least only to a very limited degree. Contrast this with a case where an opponent beats me in a competition and where my feeling upset about this fact would make it considerably more difficult for me to focus my attention on what this fact means to him.

this empathic shifting of my mental focus will be that I will make the judgment that this state of affairs is bad for Tony because I believe that Tony does not want to die. As a second step, I will then feel sympathetically sorry and worried for Tony, based on my altruistic desire that he should not experience this bad fortune.

Note that I just spoke of the *spectator's* beliefs about the character's concerns and not about the *character's* beliefs. This includes cases, such as Tony's, where I believe that a character has a preference, but where I also believe that the character is unaware of the state of affairs so that he feels no or a different emotion compared to what he would experience if he were aware of the state of affairs.

Furthermore, this includes cases in which I believe that a character or a real person has a concern, but where I also believe that she will only develop this concern at a later moment in time, such as the future goal of my teenage daughter to have a good education and a decent job.

A third possibility are cases where I believe that a character or a real person has a concern, but where I also believe that the person is confused, meaning that he does not realize what is good for him, or what I believe that he really prefers.

Fourth, this includes cases in which I believe that a character or a real person knowingly sacrifices one of his concerns in favor of another.

So, when I am making the inference that it is a bad thing for Jesse, from *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013, Vince Gilligan et al), to have fallen in love with a drug addict, because I believe that Jesse really wants to take himself away from drugs, then I am empathizing with Jesse, according to my theory, even though he feels happy when he gets high with his new girlfriend (S.02.E.11).

However, when I am making the inference that this state of affairs is bad because it will alienate my partner-in-crime who I need in order to realize *my* goal of making a lot of money, as is probably the case with Walter White within the fiction, then I am not empathizing with Jesse.

That said, we can also empathize, in my sense of the term, with the feelings of a character or another person. That is, I can focus my attention on the fact that Tony feels nothing and conclude that, given the circumstances, it is a good thing for Tony that he feels nothing, because I believe that Tony prefers to be free of pain. Or I can empathize with Jesse, in my sense of the term, when his first shot of heroin puts him in a blissful feeling state, and I conclude that it is a good thing for Jesse that he feels blissful, because I believe that Jesse prefers to feel blissful.

Similar to Giovanelli's model, my account can thus explain why we often have mixed sympathetic feelings: For example, wishing Tony well, I may feel worried for him because he could lose his life, and at the same time feel happy for him, because at least it would be a painless death. Contrast this with our more intense sympathetic response in the scene where Tony briefly wakes up from the coma and is visibly in intense pain and distress (S.06.E.02). Alternatively, I might feel sorry and worried for the mother from *Stepmom* when she undergoes chemotherapy because this will cause her many bad feelings, and at the same time feel happy and hope for her because this arduous treatment could preserve her life.

In a fuller account, which I can only hint at here, I think we should also allow for the fact that we can empathize with another on the level of their non-preferential needs, or their non-preferential mental and physical health. Hence, while I may feel sorry for Randy from *The Wrestler* (2008, Darren Aronofsky) because his suicidal return to the ring will objectively

cause him to suffer a deadly heart attack (i.e. irrespective of Randy's subjective preferences), I may at the same time feel happy for him, because this is what he subjectively wants, and because this will put an end to his persistent emotional suffering.

Thus, roughly corresponding to some of the major philosophical theories of well-being (preference satisfaction theories, hedonism, and objective theories),[13] I propose a pluralistic account of empathy, sympathy, and well-being, according to which we can empathize with another a) on the level of their preferences alone, b) on the level of their preferences and feelings, and c) on the level of the other's objective needs. In each of these options, empathizing with another means focusing one's attention on how a state of affairs in the world – such as the fact that the mother from *Stepmom* has cancer, or the fact that she feels miserable – affects the other's preferences or needs, as opposed to appraising or thinking about how that state of affairs affects the empathizer himself (e.g. the spectator when watching a film).

Advantages over the Simulation Paradigm

One of the advantages of my proposed account over the simulation paradigm is that it need not deny that we are empathizing with another just because the other happens to be unaware of his good or bad fortune and therefore feels a different emotion from the observer, although the situation otherwise seems to have all the hallmarks of our naïve intuitions about empathy.

Consider a father who feels afraid for his little son as the latter cheerfully runs onto the busy street to retrieve his ball. Should we really accept the standard reply to such counter-examples to the simulation theory of empathy, namely that the father's likely failure to share his son's happiness in this moment is due to the fact that he happened to choose not to empathize with his son, so that he is only sympathizing with him?[14] I don't think so, because even by the simulationist's own assumptions, empathizing is usually thought of as something that we are most likely to do when the other is a loved one. So, why should it be that the father just happens to refuse to empathize with his son in this very moment when so much is at stake for the son?

Moreover, wouldn't we expect that most parents would fear for their children in such a situation without replicating their children's happiness? But if so, then the standard reply of the simulationist would implausibly imply that most parents refuse to empathize with their children when they are in great danger. But if even parents only rarely empathize with their own children when the stakes are so high, why should it be that, at the same time, we often, frequently or occasionally empathize with others in situations where much less is at stake or where the other person is a mere acquaintance, stranger, or fictional character?

My own account, according to which the father fears for his son *because* he is empathizing with him – and not in spite of a lack of empathy – but where this does not imply that he needs to be focused on the son's present, past, future or hypothetical feelings, let

[13] For an introduction to the philosophy of well-being, see Crisp (2017). For a more detailed overview, see, e.g., Sumner (1996).

[14] I am here using the definition of empathy as something that we do in addition to mindreading, as has been proposed by De Vignemont and Jacob (2012), in part as a concession to the phenomenological criticism of the simulation theory of mindreading. I present my own arguments against the simulation theory of mindreading in my upcoming dissertation.

alone replicate those feelings, has no such counterintuitive and consequentially self-contradictory implications.[15]

Another advantage of my account is that it explains straight away why we think of empathy as something that is morally valuable. Simulationist definitions of empathy, in contrast, have a harder time accounting for this intuition since their core criterion for empathy is, to some extent, just another form of egocentrism, as I define it.

This becomes particularly apparent when we think of what one might call associative simulation, or what Hoffman refers to as "egoistic drift" (2000: 56). For example, when I read a book about someone who loses his wife and his job, but then wander off into a daydream in which I imagine how terrible it would be for *me* if *my* wife left me, or how terrible it would be if *my* employer fired *me*. Doesn't the other completely disappear in such an imaginative project?

Of course, associative simulation is not really what simulationists have in mind when they speak of empathy, since, in their view, we *transform* ourselves into the other when we empathize with them (e.g. Goldman 2006; Stueber 2006; De Vignemont and Jacob 2012). But is this process really so different, apart from the fact that in order to do so, we have to focus our attention on the concerns and traits of the other? Should we really call it empathizing, when, for example, I imagine that I am James Bond and possess his admirable skills to please women and remain cool in the most dangerous of situations? And if not, why is this kind of *fantasizing,* or "central imagining" in Wollheim's (1999) terms, different from a case in which I supposedly imagine or pretend that I am the mother from *Stepmom* or her seven-year-old son?

More importantly, just how plausible is it that we imagine ourselves to be the characters *while* we are engaged in reading a book or watching a film in the first place? Isn't it phenomenologically much more apt to say that our thoughts are *with* these characters, just as we say that our thoughts are with the victims of a terrorist attack and their families when we learn of tragedies like the suicide bombing at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester? And isn't what we mean with that expression just the empathic stance as I describe it? Moreover, wouldn't it sound rather tactless if I expressed my empathy with the victims and their families in such cases by saying that I have just pretended to be them and that this made *me* feel very bad?

One might object that associative simulation is not always a bad thing. For example, when my friend Anna dismissively tells her son that he shouldn't make such a fuss about his broken toy car, I might ask her to think about what she would think and feel if someone ruined her beloved Gucci dress, to improve her empathy. Clearly, though, what I would expect from Anna in such a case is that she should infer that the boy's fondness for his car might be as strong as her fondness for the dress, and to use that knowledge or supposition in a second, more informed attempt to empathize with her son; that is, in a second attempt to think about what it means to *him*, as opposed to *her*, that his toy is broken. And much of the same seems to apply to cases where, for lack of a better alternative, we appeal to our children's pronounced egocentrism in order to teach them to become better empathizers, when we say things like, "How would you like it if I pulled *your* hair like that?"

[15] For an alternative account of the relationship between empathy and sympathy that avoids the commitment to say that the father is not empathizing with his son, see Giovannelli (2009).

Advantages Over the Direct Perception Theory

So far, I have mainly compared my account to the simulation theory of empathy, but I think my proposal also has clear advantages over the direct perception theory of empathy. First of all, unlike my account, the direct perception theory has the rather counterintuitive implication that we can only empathize with others when they are within reach of our perception. This would exclude cases where we merely hear or read reports of other people's tragedies and triumphs, but also cases where, for example, we think about our friend's situation after they have told us about their predicament and have returned home.

Or consider the scene from *Stepmom* in which the mother is talking to her unsuspecting son on the phone from her bed in the hospital, and where she breaks out in tears of sorrow when he says that he misses her, and she suggests that they will have to meet in their dreams, which enlivens the son. At best, we could say that, in this situation, the mother is perceiving her son through his voice on the phone. Even if one grants this point, however, the boy's state at that moment is one of happiness, not sadness. Moreover, the mother's empathic focus at this moment clearly isn't on the current mental state of her son; rather, it is on the future states when the son learns of the fact that the mother is going to die, and when he has to go on living without her. But if the mother is empathizing with such future states, how can she be said to be directly perceiving them at this moment in time?

Alternatively, a defender of the direct perception theory of empathy could use the same evasive maneuver as the simulationists and say that, in this case, the mother isn't empathizing with her son, but merely sympathizes with him. Any theory of empathy that doesn't grant that the mother is empathizing with her son at this moment, though, seems to me to be suspect. Because if we agree that it seems intuitive that most mothers would empathize with their children's mental states when they observe them while the children are aware of losing something that has great import for them (their health, a parent, a beloved toy), then why should it be that the mother shows no empathy whatsoever when she thinks of the same mental states in her child's absence or in prospective or hypothetical terms? Wouldn't we expect that the mother's mental process is more or less the same in all these scenarios?

In addition to cases where the direct perception theory fails to predict empathy although our intuitions do so, there are also cases in which the direct perception theory predicts empathy, even though this seems intuitively implausible. To illustrate such a case, consider the football player who sees that his opponent has hurt his knee and is grimacing from pain, but who merely appraises this fact from the egocentric point of view of his goal to win the game and thus feels happy about this fact.[16] All the conditions of the direct perception view are met, and yet I take it that few of us would say that such a response can be deemed empathic. Thus, as with imagining how someone feels, I think it is better to consider the perception of other people's expressive behavior to be only a contingent intensifying variable of empathy since by itself it seems to me to be neither sufficient nor necessary for empathy.

As for Gallagher's account of empathy, which matches my account insofar as Gallagher also maintains that "we can empathize with humans who live in far away lands and who are very different" (2012a: 370), I think our positions are relatively close. The main divergence is that Gallagher upholds the notion that empathy must be a feeling state, whereas

[16] Note that this would not be a case of schadenfreude as I define it below, but an ordinary self-oriented response.

I deny that empathy as such involves any feelings, although it is a precondition for the arousal of our sympathetic and antipathetic emotions.

The Background of the Third-Person Theory

So, allow me to conclude with some elaborations that further support this theory. As I have already indicated, the starting point of my account of empathy is the theory that our ordinary, self-directed emotions are triggered when we appraise a certain state of affairs in the world as being either positive or negative with regard to our own concerns or preferences (Ortony, Clore and Collins 1988; Frijda 1986; Lazarus 1991). This includes our goals, preferences in taste, or normative principles about what is right or wrong conduct, etc.

Hence, simply put, one can say that when the world is as we want it to be, we feel hedonically positive emotions, and when the world isn't as we want it to be, we feel hedonically negative emotions, and when our own preferences are not affected, we feel no self-oriented emotion.

Note that once we discard these individual concerns or preferences that everybody has and that form part of one's own point of view on the world, all we are left with are cold, raw or objective states of affairs, and that it then becomes difficult to say whether these objective facts in themselves are good or bad. Or, as some philosophers of well-being would argue, things are always good or bad *for* someone, and whether something is good or bad *for* someone depends on their individual preferences (e.g. Railton 1986; or to some extent Griffin 1986). Or, as one could also say, it depends on one's subjectivity or one's egocentric point of view on the world.

In contrast to our usual self-directed emotions, which are direct responses to states of affairs in the world (or what we believe to be the states of affairs), our sympathetic and antipathetic emotions take as their object our belief that a state of affairs in the world is positive or negative with respect to another person's concerns.[17]

Depending on whether I wish the other well or ill, and whether I believe that the other deserves their (subjectively understood) good or bad fortune, I will then feel either one of the following emotions (when we limit our scope to goals and present situations):

a) *Feeling sorry for someone,* which basically means that I feel upset about the fact that something has happened to another person that I consider to be negative with regard to the other person's concerns. This includes feeling any unwanted negative emotion, such as pain. The same applies to the other sympathetic or antipathetic emotions.
b) *Feeling happy for someone,* which basically means that I feel happy about the fact that something has happened to another person that I consider to be positive with regard to the other person's concerns.
c) *Feeling schadenfreude for someone,* which basically means that I feel happy about the fact that something has happened to another person that I consider to be negative with regard to the other person's concerns.
d) *Feeling resentment* (or what in German is called *Missgunst*), which basically means that I feel upset about the fact that something has happened to another person that I consider to be positive with regard to the other person's concerns.

[17] For this widely accepted definition of sympathetic and antipathetic emotions, see, e.g., Ortony, Clore and Collins (1988).

So, for these emotions to have an object, it is not sufficient that I wish the other well or ill. This is because I will also have to make a judgment or form an opinion of whether the relevant states of affairs are in fact good or bad for the other – regardless of whether the other knows about the state of affairs. And in order to make this judgment, I will have to focus my attention on the concerns of the other and start to think about how these concerns, which I believe the other to have, are affected by the state of affairs. To do this, I will have to step out of my egocentric perspective on the world because as long as I only look at the world from the point of view of *my* concerns, I will be unable to form this opinion. And this seemingly trivial, highly dynamic, and gradually variable shift of my mental focus – which we demand in everyday language with expressions like "look at this from *my* point of view" or "how do you think this makes *me* feel" – is the essential aspect of the act of empathy, according to my account.

If this analysis is correct, we have good reasons to believe that empathy, as I understand it, is a necessary condition for our sympathetic and antipathetic emotions, although I admit that the latter notion may initially sound somewhat counterintuitive to some readers.

References

Baron-Cohen S (1995) Mindblindness: an essay on autism and theory of mind. MIT Press, Cambridge

Blanchet R, Vaage MB (2012) Don, Peggy, and other fictional friends? engaging with characters in television series. Projections 6(2):18–41

Carroll N (2011) On some affective relations between audiences and characters in popular fictions. In: Coplan A, Goldie P (eds) Empathy: philosophical and psychological perspectives. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Coplan A (2004) Empathic engagement with narrative fictions. J Aesthet Art Critic. 62(2):141–152

Crisp R (2017) Well-being. In: Zalta EN (ed) The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition) https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/well-being/

D'Aloia A (2012) Cinematic empathy: spectator involvement in the film experience. In: Reynolds D, Reason M (eds) Kinesthetic empathy in creative and cultural practices. Intelect, Bristol

De Vignemont F, Jacob P (2012) What is it like to feel another's pain? Philos Sci 79(2):295–316

De Vignemont F, Jacob P (2016) Beyond empathy for pain. Philos Sci 83(3):434–445

Eder, J (2008) Die Figur im Film: Grundlagen der Figurenanalyse. Schüren, Marburg

Fodor JA (1987) Psychosemantics. MIT Press, Cambridge

Frijda NH (1986) The emotions. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Gallagher S (2001) The practice of mind: theory, simulation, or interaction? J Conscious Stud 8(5–7):83–107

Gallagher S (2007) Simulation trouble. Soc neurosci-uk 2(3-4):353–365

Gallagher S (2012a) Empathy, simulation, and narrative. Sci Context 25(3):355–381

Gallagher S (2012b) In defense of phenomenological approaches to social cognition: interacting with the critics. Rev Philos Psychol 3:187–212

Gallagher S (2015) The new hybrids: continuing debates on social perception. Conscious Cogn 36:452–465

Gallagher S (2017) Empathy and theories of direct perception. In: Maibom H (ed) The Routledge handbook of philosophy of empathy. Routledge, London

Gallagher S, Gallagher J (2019) Acting oneself as another: an actor's empathy for her character. Topoi https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-018-9624-7

Gallagher S, Hutto D (2008) Understanding others through primary interaction and narrative practice. In: Zlatev J, Racine TP, Sinha C, Itkonen E (eds) The shared mind: perspectives on intersubjectivity. John Benjamins, Amsterdam

Gaut B (2010) Empathy and identification in cinema. Midwest Stud Philos 34(1):136–157.

Giovannelli A (2008) In and out: the dynamics of imagination in the engagement with narratives. J Aesthet Art Critic 66(1):11–24

Giovannelli A (2009) In sympathy with narrative characters. J Aesthet Art Critic. 67(1):83–95

Goldman AI (2006) Simulating minds: the philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience of mindreading. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Gopnik A, Meltzoff A (1997) Words, thoughts, and theories. MIT Press, Cambridge

Grodal T (1997) Moving pictures: a new theory of film genres, feelings, and cognition. Clarendon Press, Oxford

Griffin J (1986) Well-being: its meaning, measurement, and moral importance. Clarendon Press, Oxford

Hoffman ML (2000) Empathy and moral development: implications for caring and justice. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Hu L, Iannetti GD (2016) Painful issues in pain prediction. Trends Neurosci 39(4):212–220

Husserl E (2016) Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution und Wissenschaftstheorie. Fonfara D (ed) Dordrecht: Springer

Hutto D (2008) Folk-psychological narratives. MIT Press, Cambridge

Iannetti GD, Salomons TV, Moayedi M, Mouraux A, Davis KD (2013) Beyond metaphor: contrasting mechanisms of social and physical pain. Trends Cogn Sn 17(8):371–378

Jacob P (2011) The direct perception model of empathy: a critique. Rev Philos Psychol 2:519–540

Jardine J, Szanto T (2017) Empathy in the phenomenological tradition. In: Maibom H (ed) The Routledge handbook of philosophy of empathy. Routledge, London

Krishnan, A, Woo CW, Chang LJ, Ruzic L, Gu X, López-Solà M, Jackson PL, Pujol J, Fan J, Wager TD (2016) Somatic and vicarious pain are represented by dissociable multivariate brain patterns. eLife 5:1–42.

Lavelle, JS (2012) Theory-theory and the direct perception of mental states. Rev Philos Psychol 3:213–230

Lazarus RS (1991) Emotion and adaptation. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Newen A (2015) Understanding others: the person model theory. In: Metzinger M, Windt JM (eds) Open MIND, Frankfurt am Main

Newen A, Welpinghus A, Juckel G (2015) Emotion recognition as pattern recognition: the relevance of perception. Mind Lang, 30:187–208

Ortony A, Clore GL, Collins A (1988) The cognitive structure of emotions. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Plantinga, C (2009) Moving viewers: American film and the spectator's experience. University of California Press, Berkeley

Railton P (1986) Facts and values. Philos Topics 14(2):5–31

Scheler M (2008) Wesen und Formen der Sympathie. In: Frings M (Hg) Gesammelte Werke, Band 7. Bouvier, Bonn

Schmetkamp S (2017a) Perspektive und empathische Resonanz: Vergegenwärtigung anderer Sichtweisen. In: Hagener M, Vendrell Ferran, I (Hg) Empathie im Film: Perspektiven der Ästhetischen Theorie, Phänomenologie und Analytischen Philosophie. Transkript, Bielefeld

Schmetkamp S (2017b) Gaining perspectives on our lives: moods and aesthetic experience. Philosophia 45(4):1681–1695

Smith M (1995) Engaging characters: fiction emotion and the cinema. Clarendon Press, Oxford

Spaulding S (2010) Embodied cognition and mindreading. Mind Lang 25(1):119–140

Spaulding S (2015) On direct social perception. Conscious Cogn 36:472–482

Spaulding S (2017) On whether we can see intentions. Pac Philos Quart 98(2):150–170

Spaulding S (2018) How we understand others: philosophy and social cognition. Routledge, New York

Stein E (2008) Zum Problem der Einfühlung. In: Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe, Band 5. Herder, Freiburg

Stueber KR (2006) Rediscovering empathy: agency, folk psychology, and the human sciences. The MIT Press, Cambridge

Sumner LW (1996) Welfare, happiness and ethics. Clarendon Press, Oxford

Tan ES (1996) Emotion and the structure of narrative film: film as emotion machine. Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah (New Jersey)

Vaage MB (2006) The empathetic film spectator in analytic philosophy and naturalized phenomenology. Film and Philosophy 10:21–39

Vaage MB (2010) Fiction film and the varieties of empathic engagement. Midwest Stud Philos 34(1):158–179

Wollheim R (1999) The thread of life. Yale University Press, New Haven

Zahavi, D, Overgaard S (2011) Empathy without isomorphism: a phenomenological account. In: Decety J (ed) Empathy from bench to bedside. The MIT Press, Cambridge

Zahavi, D (2014) Self and other: exploring subjectivity, empathy, and shame. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Zahavi D (2017) Phenomenology empathy and mindreading. In: Maibom H (ed) The Routledge handbook of philosophy of empathy. Routledge, London

Zaki J, Wager TD, Singer T, Keysers C, Gazzola V (2016) The anatomy of suffering: understanding the relationship between nociceptive and empathic pain. Trends Cogn Sn 20(4): 249–259